



HAWTHORNE Fine Art

XANTHUS RUSSELL SMITH

b. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1839; d. Edgehill, Glenside, near Philadelphia, 1929

Although he began his artistic career painting landscapes, Xanthus Smith established himself as a specialist in making detailed portrayals of historic Civil War marine battles and, in later life, as a photographer. He was born into a family of artists headed by his father William Russell Smith (1812-1896), whose parents had moved to the United States from their native Scotland around 1819.ⁱ By the time he was thirteen, William was in Philadelphia, apprenticed to James Reid Lambdin (1807-1889), who prepared him for his initial occupation painting theatrical scenery, which he later abandoned for a specialty in landscape painting. William married Mary Priscilla Wilson (died 1874), who was a flower painter and a teacher of French and Latin. It was she who schooled Xanthus (reportedly a sickly child) at home in rural Branchtown, near Philadelphia, where the family had moved when Xanthus was around three years old, hoping to improve his health.ⁱⁱ At about this time Xanthus's sister Mary (1842-1878) was born. She, too, became a professional artist and enjoyed her principal success as a painter of animal genre.ⁱⁱⁱ

According to Xanthus Smith, his path to an artistic career was set when his father gave him a sketchbook when he was six or seven years old. At his father's side, the young Xanthus acquired skills in landscape painting, honed especially during summer sketching excursions to the White Mountains. Particularly valuable in his education was a lengthy trip the family took to Europe in 1851-52. Docking in Liverpool, their tours took them through England, Wales, and Scotland, and then to Paris. Smith recalled looking at every painting available, and developed a preference for the works of the British painters Clarkson Stanfield (1793-1867), David Roberts (1796-1864), and George Cattermole (1800-1868), the first of whom was a renowned marine painter whose works possibly stirred Smith's interest in that field.

Although Smith was determined to be a painter, he attended chemistry classes at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine in 1856-57 and 1857-58. In 1858 he registered for permission to draw from the collection of plaster casts held by the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. He had already made his professional debut at the Academy's 1856 annual, showing *Edgehill-a study from Nature* (then owned by Harry Ingersoll), which received encouraging notice in *The Crayon*: "Russell Smith and Xanthus Smith contribute together three pictures; the latter a study from Nature, of remarkable merit for so young a person."^{iv} (The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts would remain the principal exhibition outlet for Smith's works until the late 1880s.) For the most part Smith's early efforts focused on the area around his father's home and studio, Edgehill. After visiting the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1858 to see the ground-breaking exhibition of British art, a large portion of which featured works by the Pre-Raphaelites, Smith entered a brief flirtation with the Pre-Raphaelite still-life-in-landscape mode, exemplified by the Ruskinian technique revealed in *Wild Strawberries* (1861, MME Fine Art, New York).^v



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The outbreak of the Civil War disrupted the otherwise smooth course of Smith's career. He enlisted in the US Navy in September 1862 and was appointed captain's clerk to Commander Thomas G. Corbin on the *Wabash*, part of the Blockade Squadron stationed at Port Royal, South Carolina. It was then that Smith started to draw the ships and naval activities he witnessed first-hand, the success of which is confirmed by the commissions he received from his commanding officers. Smith returned to Philadelphia in 1863, having taken a leave of absence from his naval service. There he renewed his acquaintance with Rear Admiral Samuel Francis du Pont (whom he had met in Port Royal), and was invited to du Pont's Brandywine Creek estate, leaving with a commission to illustrate the admiral's projected history of ironclad ships. However, the commission was not fulfilled, perhaps because Smith was recalled to duty later that year, this time on the *Augusta*, whose function was to tow monitors from Virginia to Port Royal, largely in preparation for the Battle of Mobile. With the onset of his father's serious illness Smith resigned his naval commission and returned to Philadelphia in 1864.

In Philadelphia Smith resumed painting, continuing his focus on regional scenery and on naval subjects. The latter came to the attention of the Philadelphia banker Charles Rogers, who commissioned the artist to paint a large canvas (unlocated) for display in the Tradesman's Bank. This marked the beginning of Smith's reputation as a marine specialist and soon the Philadelphia dealer James S. Earle began commissioning works from Smith to market on speculation – for example, *The 'Monitor' and the 'Merrimack'* (Union League Club, Philadelphia).

With the support of Earle and growing critical approbation, Smith's financial situation flourished. He continued to spend summers painting landscapes of favorite sites and, in 1877, visited Mount Desert Island, Maine, the appeal of which led him to buy a summer home at Casco Bay.^{vi} He married Mary Binder (1860-1913) in 1879 and the two lived at his father's Edgehill estate, raising three children. He continued to sell his paintings through the Philadelphia dealers, Earle and Haseltine, but, while his marine paintings held their own on the market, his landscapes lost their currency with the advent of progressive styles imported from Europe. In the 1880s he began to explore photographic techniques and wrote a number of essays on the medium for *The Philadelphia Photographer* and the *American Journal of Photography*. He maintained a conservative aesthetic outlook and although he continued to paint well into the 1920s, he found himself side-lined by the turn of the century, reduced to selling most of his work through Newman F. McBirr, a rare book dealer in Philadelphia. He died at Edgehill in 1929, disappointed that he had failed to find a publisher for his autobiography.

ⁱ For the Smith family of painters, see the Mary, Xanthus, and Russell Smith Family Papers, 1793-1977, Archives of American Art in which Xanthus Smith's papers are on Reels 2037, 2038, and 2040. For highlights of the Smith Family papers see, Anne Ferrante, "Early Photographic Images of the Smiths: A Family of Artists," *Archives of American Art Journal* vol. 21, no. 4 (1981): 18-23.

ⁱⁱ Xanthus Smith's "Autobiographical Writings" (Archives of American Art, reel 2038) provide a rambling, but helpful record that concentrates primarily on the social and cultural changes he witnessed over his long life. Mary Wilson's family had a long association with Branchtown; her grandfather William Wilson, a weaver, had settled there around 1732.



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ⁱⁱⁱ For the best published source on the family, see Robert Wilson Torchia, *The Smiths: A Family of Philadelphia Artists* (Philadelphia: Schwarz Gallery, 1999).

^{iv} W. J., "Sketchings," *The Crayon*, vol. 3, no. 7 (July 1856): 218. Harry Ingersoll (1808-1889) was a member of a prominent Philadelphia family. His estate, Medary, was located in Fern Hill, in the northern outskirts of Philadelphia.

^v For the American Pre-Raphaelite movement see Linda S. Ferber and William H. Gerds, *The New Path: Ruskin and the American Pre-Raphaelites* (New York: Schocken Books in association with the Brooklyn Museum, 1985).

^{vi} For Smith's activity in Maine, see John Wilmerding, *The Artist's Mount Desert: American Painters on the Maine Coast* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 144.